

## Theology for Activists

Kirsten Klepfer

Pastor, Grinnell, Iowa

My theological concerns these days are directly influenced by my current situation – that of pastor in a small church in a small town in the middle of Iowa. I feel deeply the pain and horror of people in my congregation when they look at what is going on in the world, and I feel and share a sense of hopelessness or at least inadequacy in doing much more than letter writings, marches, and giving money. At our worst, we are paralyzed by the magnitude of need and suffering. My growing concern is that our theology and worship liturgy are inadequate to form us as a body that can actually change things.

Now, it is necessary that I briefly say more about my location and context in order to facilitate communication. First, for the sake of convenience, I will use the terms “we” and “our”, and in general what I mean is myself, many people in my congregation and many of the people I have encountered in Presbyterian churches that face the challenge of knowing that our faith calls us to address social injustice and feeling like we are so often spitting in the wind.

My hope today is to ask with you what the role of the church is and should be and what constitutes a theology that would compel the church to be what it is called to be. Given our particular reason for gathering, I want us to seriously ask what is our relationship to the state, to politics to our government because I think understanding that relationship is essential to exploring what theology lies behind how we go about responding to injustices committed by the state. This is probably more about ecclesiology than theology, although the former must grow out of the latter.

I only want to raise the questions, mostly because I don't have any answers and I often feel convicted by my own thinking - and I want people to be with me in that pain. I also want to affirm what we are doing here which is building together a body of disciples able to stand against and witness against torture in meaningful and *effective* ways. But as we have gathered as Christians, I would like to wonder with you: What difference does it make that we are Christian when we think about how to respond, what to do and why? Is it different from gathering as any other kind of group?

One answer to that question may be, quite simply, we are here because we are Christian and our faith compels us to figure out how to stop this. Our faith is the motivator and our context and culture determines our strategy for action. And that's undoubtedly reason enough, and I respect that. Where I run into trouble is in the area of hope. I wonder where, specifically, we locate our hope for addressing issues of justice in this world.

Let me set up a comparison:

The people I have found in the pews of churches – including myself – for the most part are willing to live as serious but ultimately domesticated disciples. Good people, who, by cultural standards, really do amazing things. They might give 10% of their income away, or write letters to their elected officials. They feel outrage at the injustices around us, build house for habitat for humanity, and much more. But, I think we are, as a corporate body – as the church large and small, still falling dramatically short of the radical life to which Jesus calls us. And for good reason. What do we really expect of ourselves? It is of course not possible for me to walk into church and ask that we give up everything, hit the road, walk into the most painful, marginalized areas of the world in service of some kind of idea that this is what God wants. I, as a pastor, would be considered unrealistic, naïve, idealistic, and unemployed.

Yet every day, army recruiters walk into our high schools and ask just that of young people in service of the idea of the United States. And people, hundreds of thousands of people, have given up their lives as they know it – their jobs, families and homes – at least for a period of time, and walked smack dab into one of the most dangerous places in the world because their government has asked them to, and they have pledged allegiance to that government. Many have died in that service. That is powerful discipleship.

The heart of our theology is found in the heart of the Torah; what Jews would call the Shema – Adonai is our God, Adonai alone. You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might. This is, of course, repeated by Jesus as being the greatest commandment in the gospels.

The choice is present throughout the whole bible, and on down through history. Where is our allegiance? And what most threatens our allegiance to God alone? We know that we *are* willing dedicate our lives to some things. And, when we do this, consciously or not, we become people

servicing those things to which we dedicate our lives. Capitalism, security, country, safety, comfort, you know the list. Then, when we are servicing our gods and our lives are molded around them, those gods also become that to which you look for hope and salvation.

Today, with the issue of torture before us and as we consider how we can continue to respond as Church, I think the question that confronts us is how does our claim of allegiance to God above all else, known in the life of Jesus, inform how we interact with the powers that torture or allow for torture or encourage or are complicit in any way. And where do we place our hope for change?

I worry that Christians of all political and theological persuasion run the risk of locating our hope in the state. Maybe we are tempted to do this because the church has so utterly failed in providing compelling visions and ideologies, where the state has at least been successful in amassing a strong sense of allegiance and loyalty to a concept or idea of the United States of America.

You could argue that the state has so exceeded the church in capturing the center of our lives that even those of us who recognize ways in which the state is in direct conflict with our values as Christians are left with only two choices – that of saying “no” to the state or of conceding. Said another way, we can either get the state to change or live with what we have. It is a model of the church always responding to the actions of our government. We work day and night, some of us, trying to get the government to do what we believe they should. We are aware of the power wielded by the United States over so many lives, and how urgent it is that we wield that power responsibly. For Christians, at our best and least selfish, we want our government and country to reflect God’s realm with Christ at the center. And I believe that our work to this end is an important part of Christian discipleship.

If our model for discipleship is Jesus, then what did his life look like in relationship to the secular political powers of his day? Jesus’ life, I think, was a sustained constant practice of voluntary dislocation. He made himself a beggar, walked the streets, ate with sinners, talked to prostitutes, hung out in places where the marginalized frequented, immersed himself with the ill. If we aren’t at least wondering if we should be doing the same as disciples in Christ, then we are neglecting something. But, is the message in Jesus’ life one that simply tells us how to act, who

to help and what is right and wrong? It seems like the community of Jesus and his disciples were not just helping people on the margins from some “other location”, but God in Jesus and the disciples were living the realm of God right in the midst of the marginalized.

Is not the call of discipleship to live in such a way as to create an alternate reality – or if you believe in a sovereign God, maybe not create but witness to the alternate reality that God has already established among us. Jesus lived as if the kin-dom were real, and everyone around him including the state were so affected by his authority and power that they were forced to respond to him. That feels different to me than the treadmill we are on today. One question to ask of the gospels is “what difference did Jesus’ life make in terms of changing the systems and governments and politics of his time?” Another question we could ask is, “what was the response to the life, relationships and community Jesus was building?” When necessary, Jesus responded directly to power and spoke truth, and did so as one who lives with a different kind of power and authority. And, he could do this because of how he lived because he operated from within a different realm.

We stand in a long tradition of the question of Christ and Culture. Neibuhr re-invigorated the question within our particular American context 55 years ago. Currently, there is a large movement of Christian scholars and leaders that advocate what they call (strangely, I think) a post-liberal Christianity. Their critique – directed mostly at the liberal Christian church is that we have allowed, and maybe even encouraged, the church to be co-opted and subsumed by the political agenda. Stanley Hauerwas is probably the most visible of these writers – as visible as possible in this time when Christians are almost invisible – except when their faith is directly tied to or invested in the power of the state. I have struggled with his understanding of the church and the often confrontational nature of his writing. But, I think he is asking in some ways the question of where we locate our hope – again, the “we” being myself, my church and I think many liberal, protestant churches.

As a pastor, I am convicted by this. I think my ecclesiology is weak and that I do locate my hope in the civil society more than in the power of coming together as the body of Christ believing that that action is formative in and of itself and has the potential to create a subversive alternate reality. For example, the practice of communion in many churches has been reduced to an individualistic personal spiritual experience rather than a powerful act of re-creating the

resurrected body of Christ that would be inherently intolerant toward any distortion of either the spiritual or physical body of Christ universal. I also wonder if I as a pastor neglect spiritual disciplines as a corporate body that when practiced over and over again actually shape and form the church “into” something powerful. This “something” may be a group of people motivated to act directly against the state when necessary. But cannot our very formation, our church liturgies, be a witness against other “liturgies” in our society? Other liturgies like shopping, seeking power, watching TV, etc. William Cavanaugh, a professor of theology at St. John’s University in St. Paul Minnesota, even calls torture a kind of perverted liturgy that forms social bodies into a kind of perverted community. And, he argues, our church liturgies are essential and necessary to counter such competing liturgies.

Cavanaugh is a practicing catholic who spent time in Chile in the 1980’s during Pinochet’s reign. He suggests that a faith that consists only of signs and indications and suggestions for what we should do in the “real” world utterly fails at standing against the practice of torture. He writes, “Liturgical symbols give Christians new ways to imagine power, and perhaps motivate them to commit to making the world a better place. Nevertheless, the problem with this view is that to enter the political is to leave the liturgical.”

I wonder if my church services, and maybe others like it, have become places where people go to learn what they should do, to be inspired to go out and act, but are not places where a new reality is established that is defiant and subversive to the reality created by our other liturgies in life. Our practices, even the ones we hope will change the world for the better, cannot simply participate in and mimic the practices of the state. We cannot create the body of Christ by making our churches look like shopping malls, and we cannot end torture by amassing enough political power to overthrow our government. Those very means to ends will shape us, and we will lose our ability to be a body that can speak truth to those powers.

I find this a compelling issue, if only because I feel despair when I “hope” that the political forces will change significantly. If I were honest, I would have to say I make a distinction between the religious and secular realms and then, I draw on my religion to buoy me up so that I can work in the secular realm to seek justice and peace as I understand those things. And I allow the politics to set the agenda and the terms of engagement. This is truly a confession. I don’t know if I trust the likes of Hauerwas and Cavanaugh who seem to actually believe that the church *can* be

changed into something through worship and through liturgy. But what if I and those of us gathered here agree even a little bit. How would that change what we do, or add to what we do – as activists...Christian activists?

I think there are obviously issues and questions that arise in looking at church activism in this way. The most obvious one to me is that of exclusivity. If we trust our liturgy and Christian practices to create an alternate reality, where does that leave those who do not participate in our liturgy? How decidedly and singularly Christian do we even want to be in our work for justice and love in this world? If we claim allegiance only to Adonai, where does that place others who share the vision, passion and integrity to the same principles of our faith. What is our responsibility toward this issue and how do our actions affect the reality for good or bad for non-Christians? Another question that arises for me is what would this shift in hope mean or rather encourage in terms of our political action and participation? Would we be encouraging, with such a theology/ecclesiology, people to give up on the political process and advocacy?

I believe strongly not just in the effectiveness, but the necessity of engaging directly our government, participating in the political process in ways that grow directly out of faith and faith convictions. But I am feeling an increasing sense of urgency in exploring the potential of our Christian disciplines and practices in and of themselves as being the most hopeful possibility for creating another reality into which all can enter and experience a different way of living. That reality could spread and create entire spheres where actions like torture are intolerable because of the very reality constituted by such a gathered body. If communion is the re-membering of the body of Christ, torture would be the ultimate distortion and the direct inverse of that reality.

To borrow a term from the labor movement, worship and specifically the practice of communion can be an ongoing practice of “organizing” the church – organizing into the body of Christ. That body would necessarily and by definition operate under different terms and practices than the terms and practices of civil society. We would “be” in the world an alternate reality that by our very existence challenges bodies formed by other “liturgies” – liturgies that inevitably lead to the distortion of God’s realm and justice.

I will suggest one small way in which I might be able to move toward this kind of radical trust in the power of Church practice. That is in the area of voluntary dislocation. This, I think, needs to be a constant practice of the church body, and not just as a means to effect change for other people. But, I think choosing to locate ourselves in places of discomfort actually changes who and what we are. We need to do this as churches, not just individuals. We can and should do things as individuals. But this practice should be a liturgy of the church – a ritual of formation. And possibly the very act of communion is in some ways a choice of voluntary dislocation because it is so contrary to the known, comfortable and self-serving liturgies of society.

This is the life we see lived by Jesus and his band of congregants. In terms of torture, I think we begin to do this when we face the truth of what it is, that it happens, and read accounts of victims in order to get a small, small taste of their suffering. And we must do this together...as church. We choose, in whatever ways we can, to literally “be” with them. “Be” in both the physical and ontological sense of being the body of Christ in the midst. And to be, in the face of seemingly unmitigated power in the state, the reconstituted body, that does not tolerate the liturgy of torture. Maybe it would be, in its very reality, enough to demand a response from the powers that be, and force people, societies and systems to choose between the liturgies of death and the reality of life. So, we just need to figure out how to do that...